Beat: News

The Annual Lyrid Meteor Shower

Peak Viewing April 22nd and 23rd

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USPA NEWS - Although the Lyrid meteor shower occurs each year from April 14–30, it will peak this year on April 22, said Bill Cooke, lead for the Meteoroid Environment Office at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, according to Space.com. The Lyrid meteor shower typically produces 15–20 meteors an hour, and this year, stargazers can expect to see about 18 meteors per hour, if the sky is clear and dark in their area, Cooke said.

Why We See Meteor Showers?

A comet is essentially a giant "dirty snowball" made of frozen gasses with embedded rock and dust particles, according to NASA. Comets, which are about the "size of a small town," originate outside the orbit of the outermost planets and follow an elliptical orbit around the sun. As a comet approaches the sun, it begins to warm up and, consequently, its ice begins to change from solid to gas. This produces what's known as a "coma," the fuzzy-shaped cloud surrounding the ball of ice. The coma, by the way, can be thousands of miles in diameter, according to Live Science. Radiant pressure from the sun, known as solar wind, then "blows" the expanding coma out to form the comet's signature tail.

As comets orbit the sun, they leave a debris trail of rock and dust. As Earth passes through these debris trails each year on its own orbit of the sun, the debris particles collide with Earth's atmosphere. When this happens, the particles disintegrate, creating bright streaks across the sky.

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The Lyrid meteor shower occurs each year in April when Earth passes through the debris trail of a comet called C/1861 G1 Thatcher, which was discovered on April 5, 1861, by A. E. Thatcher. The comet takes 415 years to orbit the sun. The Lyrid meteor shower gets its name from the constellation Lyra, because that's where the streaking meteors appear to originate. Although the comet itself may not have been discovered until 1861, the first recorded sighting of a Lyrid meteor shower was in 687 B.C., according to Chinese historical texts, NASA reports.

How To Watch The Lyrid Meteor Shower

Since the Lyrid meteor shower lasts from April 14–30, you can look for meteors on any of those nights. The best days to see the meteor shower will be during its peak in the late evening Friday, April 22, and again in the late evening on Saturday, April 23. The best time to see the meteor shower will be before 2 a.m. your local time. Watching a meteor shower is simple. All you need to do is go outside and lie down on your back or recline in a chair with your feet to the east. Then just look up at the night sky. After about 30 minutes, your eyes will adjust to the dark, and you will begin to see meteors. If you really want to increase your chances of seeing the Lyrid meteor shower, you'll want to be somewhere dark, away from city lights, so you can see the sky more clearly.

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